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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experience of an educational psychologist who completed a Fulbright Lectureship at Moscow State Pedagogical University in Russia during April and May of 1993. The chaotic situation brought about by the dramatic and rapid changes that have taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in hyperinflation, political instability, a decaying infrastructure, and a changing legal system. Although physical conditions were barely tolerable, faculty members relished their newfound freedom to read whatever printed matter they chose and to think more freely. Technology such as telephones, computer systems, and facsimile machines reflected great inequities on campus. The hierarchical structure among faculty and administrators was clearly evident. Professors' involvement in publishing scholarly works in Russia and abroad was directly related to their professional advancement. Russian professors were strongly devoted to developing a uniquely Russian personality theory rather than simply adopting or transplanting an American or European theory. Much of the inservice training being carried out with teachers in the public schools revolved around the theme of humanizing the school and helping teachers become less authoritarian. (JDD)

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An Overview of Teacher Education in Russia

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Abstract

This paper describes the experience of an educational psychologist who completed a Fulbright Lectureship at Moscow State Pedagogical University in Russia during April and May of 1993. The goal of the paper is to help the reader understand academic life in Moscow during the midst of the transition from the now defunct Soviet era into a new, more democratic era.

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Note: The author was on leave from Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan, during this Fulbright experience.

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An Overview of Teacher Education in Russia

This paper will focus on my experiences and observations as a Fulbright Scholar in Russia during April and May of 1993. Although my primary assignment was lecturing at Moscow State Pedagogical University, valuable insights were also gained during visits to Moscow State University, various institutes, and public schools in Moscow. My training as an educational psychologist obviously influenced the nature of my contacts in Moscow and the conceptual nature of my observations.

Russian educators are attempting to restructure their educational system in the midst of serious economic, political, and social problems. These problems are so fundamental and pervasive that issues in teacher education must be first seen within the context of the dramatic and rapid changes that have taken place since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Environmental Conditions

The environmental situation inside Russia could be best described as chaotic. The conversion to a free-market economy, hyperinflation, political instability, decaying infrastructure, corrupt police officers, and a changing legal system are but a few of the major challenges confronted by the Russian people. Professors, public school teachers, and college students all struggle to live within this setting while the teaching and learning process continue.

My visit to Moscow State University highlights what these social, economic, and political changes have done to what was

obviously once the pride and joy of the Soviet regime. Irony exists everywhere in Russia today. The homemade paper sign advertising WordPerfect is taped to the pillar on the main gate for students who may need such services and access to technology. A little further along the way, the large spotlights that once shone on the majestic spires of the main campus building are nearly all broken and the beautiful fountain no longer contains water along the walkway between the busts of famous Russian scientists.

As I entered the main doorway, I was met by a guard with a red armband. A chemistry student saw my inability to communicate in Russian and served as my guide/sponsor for the next hour. The statues of Mendeleev and Pavlov were barely visible silhouettes as we walked down dark corridors toward the elevators. After waiting for ten minutes, we jammed into the Otis elevator with others and went to see the view from the 28th floor. Walking down the dimly lit hallways was particularly treacherous because many of the inlaid floor strips were missing.

The conditions at the nearby Moscow State Pedagogical University were not any better. I met regularly with a class of eleven 4th Year Students who double majored in English and German and had finished their student teaching experiences last term. Class was held in an office with two hugh desks and chairs had to be brought in to accommodate all the students in such cramped quarters.

Russian University Life

Each day students and faculty would check the listing on a bulletin board to see where their classes would be held for the day. When I asked why classes were held in different rooms each day rather than the same room all semester, I was told that this scheduling of rooms was an old job during the Soviet era and this person could not lose his/her job. This situation is widespread and demonstrates how the Soviet system dealt with unemployment issues.

Since I had heard about some of these teaching hardships from previous Fulbright Scholars, I brought my own chalk and eraser with me from my home institution. Once while lecturing, I saw the absence of chalk and the familiar rag used to wipe the board clean so I proudly reached for my supplies. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the chalkboard was glazed so that I still could not write on the board!

When I asked about making a photocopy, a Russian colleague stated, "Everything in Russia is broken!" "We used to have such a machine, but a part broke and we could never get it fixed."

Although the physical conditions were barely tolerable, faculty members relished in their newfound freedom to read whatever printed matter they chose and think more freely as compared to the old Soviet days. Many professors had found ways to work within the Soviet System in order to get what they wanted in published material. If a book order in the Russian language was not approved by governmental authorities due to its controversial nature, it was possible that the same book ordered

in the English language might just slip through the censors.

The value of books at the university can be seen by the fact that books are often hoarded. I was told that many of the boxes of books brought over by a previous Fulbrighter never made it to the library for general circulation as initially planned.

The appearance of technology on campus demonstrated great inequities on campus. The phones available at the secretarial desk were as deplorable as the rest of Moscow (one out of every three properly dialed calls is said to reach the wrong number due to outdated switching systems). The phone in the Dean's office worked perfectly, so I frequently used this phone while the Dean was visiting Spain and the Canary Islands for ten days. The heads of major institutes sometimes had excellent computer systems and fax machines. This allowed them to communicate with scholars on worldwide basis over various networks.

Many university administrators fail to inform faculty members of opportunities overseas such as Fulbright Lectureships because they want these opportunities for themselves. The money provided for travel and living expenses and American academic contacts help these people advance to higher professional levels.

The hierarchical structure among faculty/administrators was clearly evident when I visited one institute. I found it almost comical that the head of the institute asked both the first and last question during my question/answer session after a lecture. Although most faculty members no longer had statues of Soviet heroes in their offices or hallways, I spotted several statues of

Lenin in a caged-in storage center. Perhaps some believe that the day will again come when the public display of Communist leaders will become popular.

My hosts seemed somewhat surprised when they asked me to tell them the topics of my lectures, and I handed them a list in order to have them select topics that they would find most relevant. The topics of multiple intelligence, cooperative learning, and humanizing the school were the most frequent topics for my lectures.

At several institutes, English translations of professional papers and published works were displayed in showcases. The topics of multicultural education, right/left brain, and cognitive topics such as information processing and problem solving still stand out in my mind based upon the titles in the showcases. The flow of ideas into Russian professional circles clearly has not stopped.

The theoretical orientation of many faculty to personality psychology was somewhat of a surprising finding. I can only suspect that Russia has been influenced by European influences as well as American psychological viewpoints. Russian professors are keenly aware of the influence of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Skinner, and Rogers on the fields of psychology and education. I was impressed with the fact that my Russian colleagues were strongly devoted to developing a uniquely Russian personality theory rather than simply adopting or transplanting an American or European theory. Although this approach is more labor

intensive and time consuming in the present day, the benefits of such a perspective should offer many positive returns in the future.

I had the occasion to ask how many professors at the institutes were actively involved in the public schools working with teachers to improve the process of teaching and learning. I was told that nearly all faculty members at one institute spend an average of two days a week in this capacity. Much of the inservice training currently being done with teachers revolves around the theme of humanizing the school and helping teachers become less authoritarian.

It would appear that old teaching habits are resistant to change even though young Russian school children today will likely confront a very different society as compared to their parents. The democratic movement in Russia will place far greater responsibility on the individual. Many Russian professors believe that American culture stresses only the personal or individual. I tried to convince my Russian colleagues that this is an overgeneralization of American life and that the real challenge for Americans is finding ways to balance the needs of the individual with the demands of society since human beings have strong personal and social needs.

I asked my colleague who had the strongest psychological focus about the status of the fields of education and psychology in Russia. I explained that in America the field of psychology holds higher status than teacher education and wondered if this

phenomenon existed in Russia. My colleague seemed quite surprised at my point and stated that it was the same way for Russian professors. The need for professors at the university and institutes to publish scholarly works in Russia and abroad is directly related to professional advancement.

The most frequent question asked by my Russian hosts was: Why would you want to come to Moscow? I reassured my colleagues that many American academics are interested in learning how Russian students learn and teachers are trained in Russia. Although the political systems of our countries brought the entire world to the brink of nuclear war, many Americans have great respect for Russians and had always resisted the temptation to perceive all Russians as the enemy. Many Americans, like myself, can also trace ethnic roots to this region.

My most often asked question in academic circles included: What is your familiarity with famous Russian psychologists? I had to admit my own ethnocentric professional preparation and state that only Ivan Pavlov and Lev Vygotsky leaped to my mind. My hosts were then quick to point out that Pavlov was not a psychologist. Although I granted them the point on a technicality, I still argued that Pavlov's research offered an important launching pad for the behavioral perspective in psychology.

The School Setting

The public schools that I visited were filled with capable students and teachers. Great care was taken by teachers to call

equally upon boys and girls in the class. Classroom demonstrations were frequently provided with students becoming actively involved in the lesson. The regimentation of the past could still be seen as teachers required that students clear their desktops and sit up straight with their hands folded before the next lesson began.

These students will compete on the world stage with American students in the near future. The bright smiles, keen minds, and physical energy of Russian children will lead to competence.

Epilogue

The contrasts between the "easy" life in America and the "hard" life in Russia must remind all humanity that such conditions reflect both strengths and weaknesses. The fact that the Russian people have survived Napoleon's invasion, Hitler's invasion, and seven decades of Communist oppression leads me to believe that the Russian system of education will survive and perhaps even thrive in the near future. A Russian college student told me of an old joke about an American and a Russian that were stranded together on a deserted island. The question was posed: Which one survived?--the Russian.